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ABSTRACT

Xavier College opened its doors in 1995 to cater to students who lived in the outer suburbs and semi-rural areas of Adelaide, Australia. Classes of 32 students contained those who could read fluently and those who could barely write their names. A curriculum pattern was established for a 2-year program in which students would be expected to complete seven units in each of the compulsory subjects of English, science, and math. A vertical classroom is a classroom with students from two different year levels; each vertical classroom is made up of students who have elected to study at a particular ability level: introductory, standard, advanced, or extended. Within each level in English, for example, there are five domains of study: novel, drama, media, poetry, and writing. As expected, there were a number of "teething problems" during the program's first year in 1998. Close monitoring using tutor teachers was introduced at the beginning of the year. A lot of assistance was needed in selecting units, particularly those of students in the lower levels. Predictably, some units of study were very popular, while others were very unpopular. Most students thought that there was a good variety of units on offer. It will be interesting to see what the long term advantages or disadvantages will be with this vertical timetabling system. (NKA)

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by Aurora Reid

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Success in the Vertical Classroom

Aurora Reid

Xavier College opened its doors in 1995 for the first time to cater for students who lived in the outer suburbs and semi-rural areas of Adelaide. For many reasons it became evident that a traditional approach to curriculum would not advantage our students.

Our class sizes of 32 students ranging in ability from those who could read fluently to those who could barely write their name created a challenge to the English teacher. I observed in my first year at the College that groups of students in my year ten class and groups in my year nine class were quite often at the same level of ability. I began to consider the possibility of removing the year level blocks and concentrating on bringing together students of like ability into the one classroom. It was with this thought that I approached the principal and deputy principal of Xavier with my idea of vertical timetabling.

The idea was tossed into the lions so to speak and then I was on leave for the rest of the term. Fr Dennis Handley, the principal, began to work with the staff on the idea of offering all subjects in this format. He decided to approach subjects on a unit basis consisting of ten weeks ie a term. A curriculum pattern was established for a two year programme. Over two years students would be expected to complete 7 units in each of the compulsory subjects; English, Science and Maths. Effectively this meant that for at least one term students could opt not to do one of each of these units. It also meant that there was opportunity for students to complete more units in these areas if they felt a particular interest. There are also a range of other subject areas that students select from during the two years.

Following is a summary of what the vertical classroom became.

What is the Vertical Classroom?

- A classroom with students from two different year levels. In this case they come from second and third year of high school, in other words year nine and ten.
- Each vertical classroom is made up of students who have elected to study at a particular ability level. We have designed four levels:
    - Introductory
    - Standard
    - Advanced
    - Extended

- Within each of the levels there are five domains of study:
    - Novel
    - Drama
    - Media
    - Poetry
    - Writing

The changes brought about by Administration were not necessarily embraced by all staff. The implications for English was in a way less dramatic than for many other areas because I had been thinking about it for awhile and was busily selling my faculty on the idea. We looked at what we were currently offering over the two years and created units based around much of what already existed. We were asked to come up with 'catchy' titles which we had fun concocting. We also designed a few new areas of study.

Once we had the units designed we then considered what our faculty curriculum pattern would look like. We decided that students must complete two novel units and one unit from each of the other domains during the two years. This left them with one free choice to meet the minimum requirements of the College's overall curriculum pattern.

Why is it successful?

- It ignores the constraints that age places upon students.
- Students are free to opt for a level that they believe best suits them.
- Students can make choices about which units to complete in each of the domains.
- Staff can pitch material at a level that the majority of students in their classroom will cope with.
- Students in need of basic skill revision benefit from smaller classes, as do those who require extending.

What are the problems?

- Hard to keep track of the number of units each student is doing as they will encounter different teachers each term.

The first year of the programme was in 1998 and as I have indicated there were a number of teething problems, which were quickly identified. We certainly had not solved all of them by the end of the year. A major concern was the tracking of students through this programme It was discovered that some of the pupils had elected to do only one or two units of English in a year, when they should have completed at least three. This was discovered when tutor teachers were asked to conduct a pattern check with students in these year levels. Closer monitoring using tutor teachers as the first port of call was introduced at the commencement of this year. A tutor teacher is similar in concept to a home or form teacher responsible for administration and pastoral care in the morning.

- Less able students became very confused with the selection process. A problem encountered for them in all their subject areas.

Students found the process to be complicated when selecting units, particularly those students in the lower levels. A lot of assistance was needed. This was a complaint of many of the students. Another problem that some of them faced was that the unit they wanted to do just wasn't available because it was too full or not enough interest was

shown. A further concern was that the level they felt they could best work in wasn't always available on the line that they wanted to do English. This meant at times, that there were very capable students in classes far too easy for them and vice versa.
It is important to understand that students were self selecting their level. Some were given advice particularly those at either end of the scale but on the whole they were left to make the decision themselves. Of course inevitably, there were students who chose a level because their friend was doing it but they failed miserably and soon worked out that it wasn't the smartest move they had made. It was good to see students making much wiser selections as they moved into the second year of their course.

- There appear to be some gaps in students' learning which is evident in year eleven. Of particular concern are students selecting English Literature courses without selecting appropriately in the previous year.

There are concerns that year eleven students have some gaps in their English skills primarily in the area of essay writing. As they could select a wide variety of units it is quite possible that they may have only written one analytical essay during year ten. It would be advisable for all year ten students to complete a pre-year eleven unit in the fourth term. This might help to ensure that all students have some similar expectations of the rigours of year eleven English.

Questions we put to our students

1. Did the students really understand what the different levels meant?
2. Had they met the English faculty curriculum pattern?
3. How many units had been completed or were to be completed by the end of 1998?

We also were curious to know about the following:

1. Which unit(s) they enjoyed?
2. Which unit(s) the disliked?
3. What unit would they create?
4. Their views regarding vertical classes.

Understanding the levels.

Few students could accurately name the different levels but the majority of them understood that there were four levels and most had a grasp of what they were. Students needed to be kept informed of the names of each level and what these implied. In particular this was evident when referring to the two middle units which seemed to be the area of most confusion.

Meeting the pattern and numbers of units

By the end of third term there were many students who had only completed two units and a smaller number who had completed only one. A large number of students listed the

units that they would complete by the end of the year and this gave a more accurate picture of what these particular students were doing in English.

The highest number of units selected for a year was seven by at least three students, 2 of whom were boys working in the advanced and extended levels. As you could expect students who had difficulties with English chose the least amount of units for a year (3).

It did become clear that students were not selecting from each of the domains but were rather choosing units from the same area such as Drama to avoid sections they did not like. It is hard to keep track of what the students are doing but it would be good if they were given a tracking form that was signed by each of their English teachers as they entered and completed a unit.

Which unit(s) they enjoyed?

Every unit that had been taught by the end of term three was commented on by at least one student in the group surveyed.

Popular units included Tickle Your Funny Bone- due to demand it was offered each term.

The World of Shakespeare had to be offered three terms and was particularly popular with girls. Romeo and Juliet was the featured play and the recent Baz Luhrman film was a great draw card. This was my moment of triumph as my principal frequently stated that if students had a choice then they would not select Shakespeare. It was therefore quite amusing that this unit was so popular.

Predictably the survey indicated that year nine boys liked A War Zone but it was interesting to note that the same number of year nine boys didn't like it.

Unpopular Units

A large percentage of students did not enjoy the unit regarding Journalism because it covered the issue of ethics and different styles of writing within this field. Students had expected to complete a newspaper- something they all did in year eight.

Another unpopular unit was called 'Accepting the Challenge'. It was a unit designed for students in the standard level and involved completing a project using the Internet. Many students found it to be complex and although the workload was broken down each term there were still large numbers of students who could not meet the deadlines. The Internet is a wonderful tool but it can not make reluctant readers take notes, compile questions and collate material in their own words. As a result of the difficulties students at this level experienced with this unit it was decided not to include it in 1999.

Creating your own units.

We were interested to know what type of units students would like to see included in future. Interestingly some of the suggestions already existed but some students had not noticed them, or perhaps it was at an unsuitable level. Of course there were the inevitable responses of "I wouldn't make another English unit, I hate English," or blank lines but a number of ideas were put forward mainly by students in year nine.

The girls speak

- A 'job' orientated unit
- Creative writing
- A TV unit
- A creative writing poetry unit called Pink Ink
- Fairytales
- Acting/reviewing plays
- Hollywood stars
- A horror unit

The boys speak

- Learning about languages of other countries
- Horror unit
- Sports media
- TV comedy
- A unit examining the best way to present work
- Making movies
- Drama with a space theme
- World of Football
- All about cars

As a result of this list a few new units were incorporated into the programme covering football, horror genre, making short films and creative writing. I would imagine the offerings will stay very much the way they are for the next two or three years before we begin the review process.

Vertical Classes

We were interested in the students' perceptions of sharing classes with people in other grades. This opened our eyes to the fact that many students did not understand the new level system at all. This was especially highlighted by comments such as this one by a year ten girl: "I don't think its fair for younger students because they may not be up to that level yet." Another year ten girl felt that '… they [year 9] are doing our subjects,' whilst another girl believed that '… year nines are at a different rate.' Year nine students seemed to be more open to the change as one boy stated '… [you] get to make friends

with other year levels' and another boy said 'it is okay but they [year 10] try to make the lower year level laugh.'

It was interesting that the year nines on the whole saw vertical classrooms as an opportunity to extend their network of friends but at the same time were concerned about the behaviour of the older students. A year nine girl said this well, 'It was hard not knowing people your own age and at times they [year 10] were rowdy but apart from that I didn't mind.'

Choosing Units

Finally we wanted to know what students thought about choices they could make. Their answers were similar in nature and essentially stated that they liked to select what interested them. They also liked the fact that they could select units that would challenge them and have others of similar ability in the same room. Most students thought that there was a good variety of units on offer. Problems that were encountered included the limited information provided in the handbook about units. This was a very valid issue and one that the faculty had no control over. We were reduced to one line descriptors which gave very limited information to prospective students. One student believed that they should be allowed to select their teacher, as we at times would love to handpick our students. Some students felt that it was a really confusing process to select units and sometimes they were cancelled or too full. Again this was a valid concern which we are working on to improve.

In conclusion

It is too early to comment on the impact that Vertical timetabling and working in levels will have on student learning. On observation, I feel that it has been conducive to smoother classroom learning as there are less overt behavioural problems. I think that this is a result of students being in a position to have success because the work is pitched at their level. By no means however are all students angels. It has helped staff with development of courses because they no longer need to provide for a wide range of abilities in each class. Therefore tasks can be structured to meet the needs of the students in the unit. I see this as being one of the greatest advantages of the system that has been introduced. Fewer students are finding themselves bored because the work is too easy or lost because the expectations are too high. It will be interesting to see what the long term advantages or disadvantages will be. Currently this paper is presented as anecdotal observation of my colleagues and students selected at random to complete a survey. At this point in time I do believe that we are having success with our vertical classrooms.